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One Phase of the Race Distinction

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One Phase of ^{the} Race Distinction

Editor of the Boston Commonwealth: - I have read, in the "North American Review" for November, an article by Gail Hamilton, entitled "Race Prejudice," and should be surprised that so brilliant and acute a writer could be so illogical, were it not that so many even more brilliant minds are beguiled into making the same mistakes when dealing with this vexed race question. Something - it may be early education, it may be the contagion of color prejudice - it is frequently both - seems to obscure their mental and moral vision, when they touch the subject of race, and to prevent them from distinguishing reason from unreason, right from wrong.

Gail Hamilton begins by criticising the "Independent" for making the statement that "the race line has not been perpetuated. It has been broken down;" and also for saying, of the negroes, "If left to themselves, without law on the subject, they will very seldom intermarry. The occasional and very rare exception to this remark would do the body-politic no harm." And she asks: "How can a race line be considered broken down so long as two races living in one community, in political unity and Christian fellowship, will, if left to themselves, very seldom intermarry - so seldom that intermarriage is the very rare exception? What prevents intermarriage but the color line; race prejudice?" I take it for granted that the writer cannot refer to the South when she speaks of "two races living in one community, in political unity and Christian fellowship," for ".... every day's report of wrong and outrage," with which the south is filled would contradict such a statement. But if she did refer to the south, I would say that another very important reason besides race prejudice would prevent

intermarriage of the races here, namely, the danger to life, from those lawless spirits, found in all classes of society, whom no "legitimate social instincts" prevented from forming illegitimate unions with the blacks, who do not now shrink from closest personal contact with them, when they are in an inferior position, but who furiously oppose honorable marriage between the races, simply because they do not choose to recognize colored people, however intelligent and cultured they may be, as their equals.

If the writer refers to the north, I answer that an important consideration which prevents intermarriage there is social ostracism - a result of the prejudice which comes, not from "legitimate social instincts," but from the southern sentiment against an oppressed race, which still too largely pervades the north; and, in many cases, from actual ignorance of the character and capabilities of the race with whom some have rarely, if ever, been brought in contact. I have known instances where hearts were strongly drawn together among those of opposite races, who were equals in refinement and culture, but where the moral courage was wanting, on the part of the whites, to brave social ostracism. But I have reason to believe that the cases in which it has been braved are more numerous than is generally supposed. I should not, however, have devoted so much space to this subject of intermarriage - which is, after all, a comparatively unimportant one, and will certainly adjust itself - had not Gail Hamilton made it a sort of starting-point for her attempted argument against the action of the Congregationalists, represented by the Home Missionary Society and the American Missionary Association, in their efforts to establish mixed churches in the south.

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It is not at all surprising that the Rev. W. Hayne Leavell, "born and reared at the south," is "discontented" with these societies because they insist that their churches must be open to black as well as to white. But I confess it is both painful and surprising to find a woman born and reared in New England, finding fault with them for obeying the plainest precepts of Christianity. Whether the race line has or has not been perpetuated; whether it has been broken down or not, has, it seems to me, very little to do with the matter. If it has not been broken down, it ought to be broken down, and Christians are, above all others, the people to do it. If we cannot look to the Christian church to right the bitter wrongs that are in the world, to overcome the unrighteous prejudices, to heal the wounds of poor, suffering, down-trodden humanity, to what can we look? This is precisely and pre-eminently its work, and if it does not do this, what right has it to bear the name of Christ? This is even a more important work than "the successful propagation of our denominational principles," which, Mr. Leavell laments, cannot be hoped for "among the ruling classes of the south, for they will not enter into church relations with the colored people. However unrighteous, this is a stubborn fact, and any one who has good knowledge of the southern character will know that it is to remain as stubborn for all time to come." Do Christians thus calmly accept unrighteous stubborn facts, and make not even the least effort to change them? That was not Christ's way. Slavery was once a very stubborn fact, and the south believed that it would "remain as stubborn for all time to come." Why should not the power of God's truth, acting upon those stubborn hearts, obliterate in the future the existing evils which sprang

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directly from slavery?

10/11/25 We are still further pained and surprised to find a New/England woman even more emphatic than a southern man in her tolerance of race prejudice. She says: "It is not an unrighteous fact. It is an ethnological fact, utterly without moral quality." It is not an unrighteous fact that men calling themselves Christians refuse to sit beside their black brother in their worship of a common God and a common Savior? It is simply an "ethnological fact, utterly without moral quality," that men who do not shrink from close personal contact with the black man when he is in a servile position, will not worship God in the same church edifice with him?

Stew "Oh, judgment, thou art fled to brutish beasts,
And men have lost their reason."

This is all very astonishing. And the explanation given by our logical writer is quite as astonishing. Again she refers to the marriage question, and says: "But when we come to this question of mixed churches, we come plumply and squarely upon the question of 'marrying a nigger.'" Do we, indeed? Then pray what becomes of the "legitimate social instinct" which she regards as "nearer the scientific truth" than Mr. Leavell's "unrighteous fact?" Surely if these instincts are so strong as to make the southern whites stubbornly averse to sitting in the same church edifice with the blacks, they must be sufficiently strong to prevent them from intermarrying, in case they were, perforce, brought together during the hours of worship. In England, where caste, not color prejudice is so deeply rooted, the very highest and the very lowest engage in religious worship together, but we must certainly acknowledge that this intercourse very rarely results in the intermarriage of the two classes. It follows, therefore,

that sitting in the same church together does not necessarily lead to intermarrying. And if it did, what then? If "legitimate social instincts" are not strong enough to prevent persons who love each other from marrying, we do not see what harm can come from it, or what anybody else can do about it. It certainly seems to be a matter which may safely be left to the individual judgment.

But Gail Hamilton's main argument against mixed churches seems to lie in the supposition that the colored people themselves are opposed to them. This she bases principally upon the statement of the Rev. B. W. Pond, of Falls Church, Virginia, who "predicts that the proposed Congregational church will fail, not more from caste spirit than from legitimate social instincts. The Congregational church in his vicinity was organized of northern elements of the most thorough-going northern anti-slavery sentiments. It has always held open doors to all, irrespective of race, color or previous conditions of servitude. It has recently extended cordial invitations to the colored people. Its members, in their private relations and standing with the colored population are held in the highest esteem, and there is the least in the world of any aims or invidious discriminations against the colored and the poor. All is free and gracious as spring water. 'Do they come?' asks Mr. Pond; 'Not one, so long as there are colored churches in the town.' Black men of large means and first-rate business talents, he affirms, are not wanting, but all the temptations of gain do not bring them, and white men into partnership relations. If Congregationalism, with all the other problems on its hands, has this also of joining that which apparently God hath separated then indeed he thinks it has its hands full."

As I know very little of Falls Church, although it is a neighbor

of ours, and was quite surprised to learn that there was so near us a church "organized of northern elements of the most thoroughgoing northern anti-slavery sentiments," I questioned a former resident of the town, one of the family of a colored man "of large means and first-rate business talents," and she informs me that she does not think there are any colored Congregationalists in the town. The colored people are mostly Baptists and Methodists. Her father, who is a Methodist, sometimes attends the Congregational church. ~~It~~ does not, therefore, seem to be any objection to coming in contact with the whites which keeps the colored people away from the Congregational church, but it is simply because they, like other people, prefer to attend the churches of their own denomination. Should some of them become converted to Congregationalism, I do not doubt that they would gladly attend a church where they would be sure of receiving a cordial, Christian welcome; and I do not think they would be at all repelled by the white complexions of its members.

But however the matter stands in regard to Falls Church, of Washington I can speak from personal experience as well as from observation. And I know that the Congregational church of this city has a number of colored members, who were drawn thither by the preaching of that earnest, brave and consistent Christian minister, Rev. J. E. Rankin, whose loss we more and more deplore. And I also know that a great many more colored persons would have attended that church regularly had they received from the members of the church and congregation the cordial Christian welcome which they received from the noble-hearted pastor. And herein lies the true reason why the white churches to which colored people are admitted are not more largely attended by them. They do not generally receive a cordial

and Christian welcome. They are, universally at the south, and frequently at the north, consigned to the most undesirable back seats and the galleries and chilling and contemptuous glances are cast upon them, by the professed followers of Christ, if they presume to take better seats, if they are not promptly ordered out by some official of the church, as is usually the case. Is it at all strange, then, that they do not feel at ease in white churches? Certainly the circumstances which surround them there are not particularly conducive to a peaceful and pious and happy frame of mind, such as befits the sanctuary.

The Rev. Mr. Pond and Gail Hamilton, if they will only look a little more closely into the matter, will find that Congregationalism has not on its hands the problem "of joining together that which apparently God has separated," but, on the contrary, that which man is trying to separate in a very unchristian manner.

It is not, then, because of race prejudice on their part that colored people do not frequent white churches. The negro has, not unjustly, perhaps been accused of being only too forgiving. He does not, as a rule, bear malice against those who have wronged him so deeply. If they will acknowledge his full manhood now he is ready and willing to forgive the past. In his own churches he gives a cordial welcome to the white visitor. My husband is pastor of a colored Presbyterian church in this city, and I can assure Gail Hamilton that she, or any other white visitor, would be most courteously received were she to come among us. The white people who frequently attend our services are always cordially welcomed, and are not banished to extreme back seats or the gallery, but are shown to some of the most desirable seats in the church - just as our colored

visitors are. This is true of all the other colored churches in our city.

No, the negro is not afflicted with race prejudice. Like all other human beings, outside of the church he chooses the society which is most congenial to him. If he is ignorant and degraded, he chooses the ignorant and degraded; if he is cultured and intelligent and virtuous- quite regardless of their complexion. It is the whites only, and too often the professedly Christian whites, who estimate a man by the color of his skin instead of judging him by the standard of culture, capability and virtue.

Gail Hamilton is mistaken in supposing that the southern blacks are as averse to the "acceptance of social unity" as the whites are. I speak from the experience of years among them as a teacher. They would gladly be on the kindest terms with the southern whites, if the latter had humanity enough and good sense enough to fully acknowledge their manhood. Intelligent and refined blacks - and there are such - would not shrink at all from social contact with the same class of whites.

Again, she says, "It is not a question of superiority or inferiority, of right or wrong, of Christianity or paganism." But we assert that it is a question of right or wrong, of Christianity or paganism, and nothing else. And from the depths of our hearts we thank these Congregational missionary societies for the noble and truly Christian stand which they have taken against the paganism of the professedly Christian south. They must expect to be persecuted and reviled for it, even by some northern people. Christ incurred the bitterest hostility of the Pharisees, but he did not the less denounce their injustice and hypocrisy, nor labor the less zealously to root

out the very foundations of their cruel and long-cherished prejudices.

His professed disciples must follow in his footsteps, in their righteous warfare against the pharisaism of this land. If they do not do this they are unworthy to bear ~~his~~ name.

I do not believe that the mixed Congregational churches will fail. They may not be numerically a success at first. But gradually and surely they will make their way - a little leaven leavening the whole lump - and accomplish great work in finally breaking down those prejudices which are so essentially unchristian - a work which, we believe, can most thoroughly be done by mixed churches and mixed schools. And they will also be a great force in elevating the blacks of the south. May not these despised people hereafter become missionaries among their arrogant white brethren? Gail Hamilton says truly that "God has often chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise." And may not these poor, ignorant blacks, under the enlightening influences of a truly Christian Congregationalism, become, in God's hands, chosen vessels - just as those twelve unlearned men were chosen by Christ for the conversion of the heathen world around them? The question to be considered is not what the south wishes, nor what the north wishes, nor what any one of us individually prefers, nor what is most expedient, - this nation has well-nigh been wrecked upon that rock of expediency, - but simply what is right. And I think if Gail Hamilton will carefully consult the New Testament she will see that these missionary societies, in the position which they have assumed, are really acting not against but with the "divine purposes;" that they are faithfully following in the footsteps of the Master.

She says: "If the black is ever to be raised it is to be by education of himself; not by a crusade at the north against race

prejudice at the south." I reply, if he is to be raised by education or himself he must have equal facilities for education with the whites, and must also be brought into contact with those who have had superior advantages - in the church as well as out of it; for surely his moral elevation is even more important than his mental improvement. If the race prejudice at the south is wrong, there ought to be a crusade against it, and Christians are the very persons who ought to carry on that crusade. With the writer, we do most earnestly "hopethat God will yet make the wickedness of man to praise him; that the rapacious and bloody crashing and crushing together of the two races will yet be a blessing to both, after the woe and curse have done their work." We know that God's purposes do not fail: -

"Right forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne,
But that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim
unknown
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his
own."

But we also know that he uses human instruments, and we believe that the desired "blessing" may be sooner obtained if the Christian men and women of this land will unite with these missionary societies in striving to purify the hearts of the people, north as well as south, from "the woe and the curse" of an unworthy prejudice, which has wrought all this terrible evil. And, as far as race is concerned, let us esteem it, not an error in judgment, nor a rebellion against Providence, but a proof of truest Christian feeling and principle to be "color-blind."

Charlotte Forten Grimke.
Washington, D.C. October, 1885 .